Appleby Archaeology Group

On Tuesday March 4th the Appleby Archaeology Group enjoyed an interesting and entertaining talk from Niall Maguire on the Medieval Defences of the Eden Valley. Mr Maguire said that his perspective was that of the historian rather than the archaeologist.

He began by showing a few slides of defences from pre-Norman times, when the entity of Cumbria was difficult to identify and when it was not always evident who the enemy was. For a time Cumbria was part of the kingdom of Strathclyde and after the establishment of the kingdom of Scotland the Scots considered it to be their territory. Defences of this time include the castle at Caerlaverock and the austere Hermitage castle near Newcastleton.

Mr Maguire then outlined some of the historical events that influenced the need and type of defences built in the border area, known as the debatable land, and in particular in the Eden Valley. He emphasised that the need for defence continued beyond the Union of the Crowns. The Norman Conquest in 1066 did not immediately affect Cumbria. In 1086 large areas were on the Scottish side of the border and thus not included in the Doomsday Book. In 1092 William ll, the Conqueror's son, marched north across Stainmore through the Eden Valley to Carlisle re-establishing it as a fortress. He also built castles along the route, examples are those at Brough, Pendragon, Appleby and Kirk Oswald, and he established the Solway as a frontier between his kingdom and Scotland. Castles were built along the border for such those at Liddell, Brampton and later at Naworth. Many of the castles started as motte-and-bailey constructions but were later re-built in stone. Religious houses were established, to some extent to administer the land, and settlers were introduced. Many families have Norman origins. among them are the Bowe's, Balliol's and Bruce's

There was a short period of stability before the Anglo-Scottish feuds resumed culminating in Edward l's claim to the sovereignty of Scotland and subsequent wars which came to an end at Bannockburn in 1314. Border defences were improved and strengthened, at this time even churches were fortified. Those at Newton Arlosh and Burgh by Sands. are good examples.

The borderland was still not peaceful. The Scots raided far into English territory, a tactic taken up

by the English, who responded with raids into Scottish territory. During the 14th century many domestic buildings were fortified and pele towers were built. These fortified buildings are most evident in vulnerable districts with a marked concentration in the Eden Valley; examples include Yanwath Hall, Dacre Castle and Clifton Hall.

By the time of Elizabeth I England was a sophisticated nation state and, although border raiding continued. little was spent on defending the north as the greater threat came from Catholic Europe. The local nobility bore the brunt of the defence. Every manor had to provide and equip a certain number of fighting men. They also had to provide men as look-outs and a number of hills are named watch hill. Beacons were lit to raise the alarm and it is thought that 90 beacon sites existed across Cumbria and that messages could be conveyed 30-40 miles in a few minutes.

In an attempt to maintain the law and keep the peace the debatable lands were divided into six Marches an East, Middle and West March on either side of the border, each with a Warden. It was well into the 17th century before peace was achieve, for example Penrith was sacked by three hundred Scots in 1627. During this period another type of defensive building appeared, the bastle, a smaller fortified houses with secure accommodation for the family upstairs and the animals accommodated beneath. These were sometimes built in small groups and some were built end to end for greater protection.

Mr Maguire conclude by showing a series of slides of the many castles, fortified houses, pele towers and bastles in Cumbria, He highlighted their specific features. and encouraged those present to visit many of them. Perhaps some summer outings!